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AUTHOR Winokur, Marshall
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ABSTRACT

The Slavonic Studies Seminar is held for one month each summer at Kliment Okhridski University in Sofia, Bulgaria. The program consists of three weeks of Bulgarian language instruction and a one-week trip around Bulgaria through interesting medieval towns, monasteries, and coastal resorts. The participants are primarily college teachers, researchers, translators, or graduate students in various Slavic fields from all over the world. The Seminar offers: (1) a chance to study a major South Slavic language in its natural environment, (2) an opportunity to meet foreign colleagues as well as Bulgarian scholars, (3) a chance to engage in research activities, and (4) an opportunity to explore Bulgaria. This article touches on all aspects of the unilateral exchange: purpose, background, academic program, international participation, problems, food and lodging, professional and personal contacts with Bulgarians, the city of Sofia, and sight-seeing trips. (Author/AM)

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Marshall Winokur
The University of Alabama
Department of German and Russian
Box 1987
University, Ala. 35486

The Slavonic Studies Seminar in Bulgaria*

Before I begin, let me make a few general remarks. Since this talk is the first attempt to present a comprehensive picture of the Seminar at an annual AATSEEL meeting, I thought it advisable to solicit comments and copies of final reports from the last two years' participants. I contacted a total of eleven participants, four of whom responded. I have incorporated their thoughts and ideas into today's presentation. In addition, Mary Gmitruk, a program officer for the East European Programs of the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), provided me with background information on the Slavonic Studies Seminar. This presentation touches on all aspects of the unilateral exchange: purpose, background, academic program, international participation, problems, food and lodging, professional and personal contacts with Bulgarians, the city of Sofia, and sight-seeing trips.

Purpose

The Slavonic Studies Seminar is held for one month each summer at Kliment Okhridski University in Sofia, Bulgaria. The program consists of three weeks of language instruction at Dŭrvenitsa, a university village on the outskirts of Sofia, and a one-week trip around Bulgaria. Participants come from all over the world, not only from the United States as in the

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IREX Teacher Exchange Program with the Soviet Union.

The primary goal of the Slavonic Studies Seminar is to improve the participants' fluency in the Bulgarian language. Secondarily, the program is designed to acquaint Seminar members with the natural beauty, historical sights, and cultural achievements of the Bulgarian People's Republic.

Background

The летен семинар по български език и литература за чуждестранни слависти и българисти or Summer Seminar in the Bulgarian Language and Literature for Foreign Slavicists and Bulgarists has been in existence since 1963. IREX first awarded travel grants to American participants in 1971. From 1971 to 1974, it sponsored five American scholars each year. Since 1975 this number has been increased to eight. In addition, participants on the IREX academic year exchange program to Bulgaria may also attend the Seminar. Basic requirements for an IREX travel grant to attend the Seminar include U.S. citizenship and full-time affiliation with a North American college or university either as a graduate student or faculty member. Unlike the Summer Exchange of Language Teachers with the USSR, the Slavonic Studies Seminar is not restricted to Americans with IREX travel stipends. Anyone who obtains an invitation from the director of the Seminar may attend. At the 1976 Seminar there were twelve American participants. Of the twelve, four did not have IREX travel awards. One had a Summer Study Grant from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS); the remaining three paid for their own transportation. In Sofia, the Bulgarian Committee for Science, Technical Progress, and Higher Education covered the costs of lodging, meals, tuition, and sight-seeing trips for all participants.

Except for a token gift of 10 leva (about $10) mid-way through the Seminar, no pocket money was provided. So it is advisable to take at least $100 with you if you wish to purchase books, souvenirs, food, or drinks. Books are, for the most part, reasonably priced. Gifts, food, and drink can be expensive depending on the shop or restaurant in which they are purchased. The hard currency stores, unlike those in the Soviet Union, do not offer quality goods at discount prices. They do, however, sell Western liquor and cigarettes, unavailable elsewhere.

Academic Program

At the beginning of the Seminar participants were tested and placed in three groups according to their proficiency in the Bulgarian langauge: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. Each group was then divided into classes of participants at similar levels of proficiency. At least this was the intent. In reality, classes often consisted of people at various levels. The classes ranged in size from five to twelve participants.

The language instructors, who were mostly women, were attentive, conscientious, and pleasant. Although they had a rather haphazard approach to grammar, (one day the aorist formation, the next day the definite article), they designed oral exercises which were very effective in getting us to speak Bulgarian during class. These classes also bolstered my confidence in speaking Bulgarian outside the classroom. On the last day of instruction, many classes presented gifts to their spirited, hardworking teachers.

Beginners had language classes from 8:30 to 11:00 a.m., Monday through Saturday. Thereafter, they were essentially free to do as they wished. Intermediate and advanced students had language classes from 8:30 to 10:15. From 10:15-11:15 they had the option of attending seminars in Old Church Slavonic, Modern Bulgarian, Bulgarian Dialectology, and Bulgarian Literature.

The topics of these seminars change little from year to year. I attended several sessions of the Old Church Slavonic Seminar but was not particularly impressed. The participants were translating Old Bulgarian texts into Modern Bulgarian. At these seminars talks by foreign scholars in either Bulgarian or Russian are most welcome. At 11:30 every day participants were encouraged to attend a lecture given by a well-known Bulgarian specialist on some aspect of Bulgarian language, literature, or culture. Thanks to an informative brochure describing each lecture, participants were able to choose lectures of particular interest to them. The quality of lectures varied, of course, with the speaker. Participants with little or no knowledge of Russian were unable to follow these lectures. Actually, in order to appreciate these lectures a good knowledge of Russian must be supplemented by familiarity with the topic under discussion. Intermediate and advanced students who attended the lectures were through by 1:00 p.m.

I would estimate that over half of the members of the Seminar were beginners. Even at this level, classes were conducted entirely in Bulgarian. The audio-lingual method of learning Bulgarian can be effective if one has mastered the basic concepts of Bulgarian grammar. Individuals without this background or without a solid knowledge of another Slavic language faced an uphill battle. A Swedish woman in my class who had no knowledge of any Slavic language was so frustrated at times that she burst into tears. The Bulgarian textbooks had little in the way of grammatical explanations and no vocabulary aids. Participants would be well-advised to take with them a Bulgarian grammar in English and a dictionary, since these items are nearly impossible to obtain in Sofia.

International Participation

The composition of the 1976 Slavonic Studies Seminar in Sofia resembled

that of a United Nations in miniature. A total of 167 people attended, representing sixteen Western and eight Eastern European countries. In terms of actual figures, however, East Europeans outnumbered Western participants by about 25. The Soviet Union topped all nations with 21 participants; it was followed by Poland with 17, Yugoslavia with 15, and the United States and West Germany with 12 each. Several participants came from as far away as Japan, New Zealand, and Mongolia. Of all the countries represented at the Seminar, one was conspicuous by its absence: Turkey. The participants from Bulgaria's other neighbors, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Romania, constituted an impressive twenty percent of the total membership. On the week-long trip through Bulgaria, our tour guides often spoke of the destruction wrought by the Turks during their five hundred years of domination over the Bulgarians. Today, one hundred years after the Russians "liberated" Bulgaria from Ottoman rule, Bulgarians still seem reluctant to forgive the Turks. Of course, it is entirely possible that Turkey had no Slavicists or Bulgarian specialists to send to the Seminar.

Participants at the 1976 Seminar ranged in age from 21 to 61. Most were either college teachers, researchers, translators, or graduate students pursuing some aspect of Slavic studies. Nearly all were fluent in at least three languages. (A Norwegian woman in my class spoke six languages with ease.)

Problems

The American group, the least cohesive at the Seminar, included four or five folklorists. Unfortunately, they frequently cut classes in order to pursue their own interests in the Bulgarian countryside. This displeased Madame Venče Popova, director of the Seminar, very much. Admittedly,

August 1976 was an excellent month for Balkan folklorists. The Five Year Folklore Festival held for two days in the delightful town of Koprivshtitsa was absolutely stunning. Koprivshtitsa itself is a living museum. It consists of richly decorated houses nestled in a picturesque valley of the Sredna Gora Mountains. One Sunday I made a special trip to observe and photograph the hundreds of native dancers who had come from every mountain hamlet to perform in their gaily colored costumes. Strangely enough, this spectacular folk festival was omitted, unintentionally I believe, from the Seminar program. Perhaps to make up for this oversight, the Bulgarian staff later arranged a private folk dance concert for us.

But to return to the point I was making... The relaxed atmosphere at the Seminar was conducive to infractions such as cutting classes. It seems to me that the Seminar provides ample free time and that participants have an obligation to attend the language classes and seminars regularly, unless a specific arrangement has been worked out ahead of time with the director.

Along the same line, the American group would do well to ensure that several of its members are <u>always</u> represented at the few formal functions that are held. For instance at one reception held for Bulgarian writers and participants, I was the only American present. It was rather embarrassing when representatives from every country at the Seminar were introduced to the writers, and there were almost no Americans present. This point leads to another concern. Should there be an American leader at the Seminar? I would like to think that this is not necessary, but without any supervision at all, Americans tend to take advantage of situations. Such a leader could be responsible for minimal supervision as well as for making thank-you speeches at the graduation ceremony and final banquet,

and also for presenting a gift to the director and her staff for doing such an excellent job. When I participated, the director had to select the person to speak on our behalf at the ceremonies. And the American group did not present her with a gift. All of this is not to say that participants from Western Europe were much better organized or acted very differently from us. The East Europeans, of course, fulfilled their obligations at these formal functions perfectly.

Food and Lodging

All participants were housed in an eight-story dormitory at Block #24. Dŭrvenitsa is located at the foot of magnificent Mt. Vitosha towering 7000 feet overhead, and this setting more than compensates for the inconvenience of being 30 minutes by bus from downtown Sofia. The university village, much like Moscow State University (M.S.U.), is self-contained, complete with café, grocery store, clinic, and night club. The majority of Dŭrvenitsa's residents are foreign students and their families. But members of the Seminar seemed to have little or no contact with people outside their own program.

The buildings at Dŭrvenitsa are typical of the pre-fab architecture prevalent in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The dormitory for Seminar participants is drab inside but comfortable. The rooms are fairly large and easily hold two beds, two desks, and a large combination wardrobe and bookcase. I never had the feeling of claustrophobia that I'd had at M.S.U. The walls, incidentally, are even wallpapered! The beds, though, leave something to be desired. They are short and narrow, with springs that have long since served their dual purpose of bed and couch. I found that a few push-ups each morning helped me regain my normal posture. My roommate, who was 6' 3", chose to jog around the campus. Each room is

equipped with a private bathroom, with a shower in the center of the room. The one problem I failed to solve is this: How do you prevent water from splattering everything in sight without a shower curtain? Still, we did have hot running water at almost any time of day or night. This luxury was the highlight of dorm life. Those of you who have lived at either Moscow State University or Leningrad State University know what I mean... And at Dŭrvenitsa, even maid service is provided daily.

With few exceptions, participants shared a room with one of their compatriots. Some participants would have preferred to room with someone from a different country. However, any type of international rooming set-up could conceivably have caused unnecessary friction among the participants that would have far outweighed the advantages. Let me give you an example. Towards the end of the Seminar I had the distinct impression that participants from Eastern and Western Europe were mingling rather freely and exchanging ideas. Political realities, however, were brought sharply into focus my next-to-last night in Bulgaria. During the tour of Bulgaria, the same procedure of assigning two compatriots to a room was followed. But when room assignments were being made in Stara Zagora, it turned out that there was no American for me to room with, nor did one of the Russians have a Russian roommate. Mr. Pavlov, the assistant director, assigned the two of us to a room. It just so happened that the Russian I was to room with was the one I had gotten to know best and I had even given him a few American paperbacks. But I could see that he was extremely uneasy about the rooming arrangements. Suddenly the Russian group converged on us, and the leader spoke quietly to Mr. Pavlov. Soon the two of us were assigned to separate rooms. I think I heard one Russian say to another: "Some of my best friends are from the West, but I wouldn't

want to room with one."

At Dŭrvenitsa most participants had roommates, but a few individuals did manage to secure private rooms. If your spouse wishes to accompany you, you should notify the director of the Seminar well in advance. Room, board, and sight-seeing trips cost approximately 350 leva ($350) last summer. Of course, the flight to and from Sofia is an additional expense.

The meals were served in a special dining room for members of the Seminar and they were quite tasty. They deserve to be rated "excellent", I might add, when compared to the fare dished out at M.S.U. We often had yogurt, fresh vegetables and fruit. I experienced no digestive problems. Sofia has a number of fine restaurants, cafeterias, and cafés in various price ranges. Unlike Moscow's Aragvi and Uzbek restaurants where the "Great Wait" confronts you both outside and in, Sofia's gourmet eating establishments are easily accessible. I highly recommend a few meals out--both for the language practice and for the delicious food.

Professional and Personal Contacts with Bulgarians

During the Summer Language Exchange of Teachers with the USSR in 1973, I spent at least eight weeks trying to meet Russian specialists in my field of Old Church Slavonic. I succeeded only in the final week, which was, for all intents and purposes, too late. By contrast, the ease of access to Bulgarian scholars at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences was an unimaginable delight. My former Bulgarian language teacher at the University of Washington, Dr. Borjana Velcheva, put me in touch with two Bulgarian researchers, Dr. I. Vladimirova and Dr. G. Popov, both of whom edit Old Bulgarian texts. After lengthy discussions, mostly in Russian, about their work and my own, I realized that my Bulgarian colleagues were using either very primitive research materials or none at all with regard to

the Greek sources. So as soon as I returned to the United States I mailed them several basic tools: Bible concordances and a Greek synopsis of the Four Gospels. I assume that these items arrived, since I recently received two records of beautiful Bulgarian and Russian Orthodox liturgical music. It is indeed a sad state of affairs when capable scholars are forced to work without proper reference materials and without access to scholarly articles and books published in the West.

Both of these scholars were exceedingly cordial and cooperative during my stay in Sofia. They devoted several afternoons to familiarizing me with the magnificent manuscript holdings of the Cyril and Methodius National Library. This included a first-hand look at one of the most valuable Old Bulgarian Biblical manuscripts in existence, the Eninski apostol, an eleventh century apostolic lectionary. In addition, they provided me with reproductions of several ancient manuscripts in the Library. Since I had expressed interest in Bulgarian icons, they obtained permission for me and two other members of the Seminar to see a unique collection of medieval icons and religious artifacts housed at the School of Religion in Sofia. As a final gesture of goodwill, Dr. Vladimirova presented me with a valuable old catalog of manuscript holdings of the Cyril and Methodius Library.

Making friends with non-academic Bulgarians in Sofia was more difficult, since the average Bulgarian shies away from contact with Westerners. Occasionally, however, one meets an individual who overcomes his inhibitions. Two other Americans and myself were fortunate in making the acquaintance of a Bulgarian man who was particularly eager to show us the sights of Sofia. He even treated us to several delicious meals in some of the capital's more colorful restaurants. In return we gave him American books,

postcards, records, and souvenirs.

Two factors adversely affected forming friendships with Bulgarians: (1) the international atmosphere of the Seminar, and (2) the physical isolation of Dŭrvenitsa from Sofia. The director and her staff did their utmost to promote contact between people of the various nations represented at the Seminar. We lived together, attended classes together, and ate together. In the dining room, the tables were unassigned; this facilitated getting to know the many participants. In the dormitory there were informal lounges and a café. The café was a constant hub of activity. Numerous friendships were made over a cup of coffee or over a slightly stronger beverage. Our Bulgarian hosts sponsored three parties where food and liquor flowed freely. And towards the middle of the Seminar, participants started to hold parties as well. Of course, participants were also together on the trips arranged by the staff. Frankly, I enjoyed the international flavor of the Seminar best of all. How often do you have a chance to try out all the languages you have ever studied on native speakers? I found myself conversing in four languages: Bulgarian, Russian, German, and English. And how often do you have a chance to compare notes with foreign professionals in your own field? In short, it was easier and more exciting and rewarding to form friendships with these intelligent, cultured, multilingual members of the Seminar, than to seek out Bulgarians.

The physical isolation of Dŭrvenitsa from Sofia speaks for itself. We did not live among Bulgarians. We lived a good half hour by bus from the center of Sofia. Since all our meals and housing were provided for, we did not really experience actual living conditions in Bulgaria. I am sure that this isolation was intentional. I did have some contact

with Bulgarians in shopping for books, gifts, and records, and my experiences were quite positive. Salespeople were generally courteous and helpful. In fact, one of my most memorable experiences occurred in a shoe repair shop where my only pair of shoes was fixed immediately without a wait. Try finding that kind of service in the Soviet Union! In summary, participants must make a special effort if they wish to meet Bulgarians.

Sofia

When I first arrived in downtown Sofia, I was greeted by a pleasant surprise. There, quite literally, lay Dorothy's Yellow Brick Road. Ruski bulevard, as it is known to the Bulgarians, is a wide yellow cobblestone street. The Georgi Dmitrov Mausoleum, the National Art Gallery and Ethnographic Museum, the Russian Church, first-class hotels and restaurants, and Sofia's finest art and antique shops line this avenue, which is sealed off from vehicles. Sofia is the political, economic, and cultural center of Bulgaria as well as the capital. Surrounded by four spectacular mountain ranges, it lies at an altitude of 1800 feet. Although the climate in summer is usually warm, there are occasionally cold, rainy days and cool nights. On August 7, 1976, the members of the Seminar were treated to a rare sight. Majestic Mt. Vitosha, which normally has no snow in the summer months, had acquired a white crown during the night.

The greater metropolitan area of Sofia has a population of over one million. Despite this, the major points of interest, such as hotels, libraries, museums, restaurants, shops, theaters, and the American Embassy are located within walking distance of each other. Sofia has a fascinating assortment of ancient and modern churches, many of which are still active. A trip to the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral on a Sunday morning is an

exhilarating experience. The two mosques in town serve only as historical monuments.

Sight-Seeing Trips

Trips during the instructional part of the course included a visit to Mt. Vitosha with its unusual gold-colored boulders fifteen feet in diameter, a tour of the diminutive Bojana Church with its realistic medieval frescoes, a trip to the peppermint-striped Rila Monastery perched high in the rugged Rila Mountains, and a visit to the Velingrad Industrial and Agricultural Complex renowned for its amorous storks. My fears that trips would be full of propaganda proved to be unfounded. Instead, our Bulgarian hosts made a genuine attempt to acquaint us with the charming countryside, rich past, and socialist achievements of their nation. In the town of Velingrad, where we were supposed to visit a collective farm, we spent most of our time enjoying a delicious five-course meal and observing the local stork population. I felt almost guilty that we stopped for only five minutes on our way back to Sofia to observe women harvesting grapes at the collective farm.

The week-long trip around Bulgaria was well-timed linguistically, coming as it did at the end of the program. By that time, I was able to understand eighty to one hundred percent of spoken Bulgarian. Consequently, I was able to profit from our guide's commentary. The tour, which followed a circular route, included a number of interesting medieval towns, monasteries, and coastal resorts: Gabrovo, the Drjanovski Monastery, Veliko Tŭrnovo, Albena, Nesebŭr, Stara Zagora, and Plovdiv. The basic problem with many of the trips was a lack of time. It was an injustice to spend a mere forty-five minutes at the lovely Rila Monastery because we had reservations at a restaurant in some nondescript town. We suffered the same fate in

Veliko Tŭrnovo and in several other cities. Perhaps this was intentional--a sort of whetting of the appetite!

Concluding Remarks

The Slavonic Studies Seminar in Sofia has a great deal to offer Slavicists: (1) a chance to study a major South Slavic language in its natural environment, (2) an opportunity to meet talented foreign colleagues as well as Bulgarian scholars, (3) a chance to engage in research activities, and (4) an opportunity to explore the enchanting capital and unspoiled beauty of the Bulgarian countryside. The atmosphere of the Seminar was relaxed and the accommodations and food were good everywhere. The Bulgarian government spared no expense to welcome and impress us. The program director and her staff went out of their way to insure that the program functioned smoothly and that the participants were satisfied. My only regret is that the Seminar ended just as I was beginning to really feel comfortable with the Bulgarian language. Let me conclude by saying that I recommend this Seminar very highly.